



PRESS RELEASE

U.S. EMBASSY RANGOON

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Fourth of July Speech June 8, 2012

Welcome everyone, and thank you for joining us tonight to celebrate America's 236th year of independence.

We are just a few weeks away from the Fourth of July, a date all Americans hold dear. It was on that day, in the year 1776, when thirteen small, separate colonies came together in a Continental Congress in Philadelphia and voted to declare independence from their colonial rulers. Like you, we were once a colony.

Since its earliest days as a nation some 236 years ago America has faced immense challenges. The transition from revolution to nation-building was neither easy nor smooth. Our Westward expansion and our rapid industrialization came at a high price. Over the years we've stumbled into financial crises and foreign conflicts. We've faced civil unrest and civil war. But ultimately, we've picked up the pieces and forged ahead. We've rebuilt our cities. We've reformed our laws. We've learned from our mistakes and we've adapted our ways. Today we are a nation that is more democratic, more prosperous and more at peace than we were when we were founded. And we're not done yet.

America has been called a "permanently unfinished country; a work in progress." It's true. Each year we write another chapter in its incredible story. It is a story written by people of different races, religions, cultures and beliefs. It is, at its heart, a story about diversity. Like you, we are a country rich in ethnic diversity!

Just take a look around you. The Americans you see here tonight do not share a common ethnic origin. What we do share is an idea: the idea of freedom and equality for all. We represent an America that embraces pluralism that spans racial, religious, and ethnic divides.

Since its founding, the United States has welcomed people from all over the world as residents and citizens. In fact, the majority of Americans can trace their ancestry to another country, and today the number of foreign-born Americans is higher than ever. We are also a land of many faiths, with synagogues and churches and mosques and temples. By all accounts, the United States is the world's most religiously diverse society.

Of course, it isn't easy maintaining unity in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society. It can be difficult to communicate across cultural or political divides. It can be hard to find common ground when the values of the 1% seem so far apart from those of the 99%. America is not a perfect example. We are still learning.

But if America in its evolution has a lesson to teach, it is that when a nation embraces its diversity, when it is united in purpose, and when it is committed to equality, it can overcome its differences, it

can rise to any challenge and it can reach unimaginable heights. We believe in strength through diversity. It is ultimately a tremendous advantage!

We don't have to look very far to see another country that has achieved the unimaginable in such a short period of time. Over the past nine months that I have been in this amazing country, I have seen the changes – I have felt the changes – that have taken place.

Nine months ago, the idea of a free and fair election seemed like a distant dream. Today, the largely well-run and peaceful by-elections are a reality that deserves our recognition and congratulations. For his leadership President Thein Sein should be commended.

Nine months ago, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had only begun to venture out of the city after years of house arrest. Today, she is a member of parliament who is taking her place on the world's stage.

Nine months ago, Min Ko Naing and Zaganar were being held in prison for nothing more than their beliefs. Today, they and hundreds of other political prisoners are not only free they are working and contributing to the betterment of their country.

Everywhere you turn, the change has been amazing. The stoppage of the Myitsone Dam. The establishment of a Human Rights Commission. The signing of twelve peace accords. The erosion of censorship. The development of a more inclusive parliament.

This country has come farther than most would have thought possible. Many of our colleagues and leaders from Washington have come here to see these historic changes for themselves, and being impressed with what they saw, have begun easing some of the long-standing burdens on our two countries' relations.

We are all very, very positive about what is happening, and we know how difficult the path ahead will be. However, as far as this country has come, there is still much work to be done. Progress has been remarkable, but it cannot stop here. The issue of political prisoners is not over and many still languish in jail. Rule of law is a work in progress and corruption must be addressed. All fighting and human rights abuses in the ethnic areas must stop and real discussions move ahead. The progress towards true democracy must continue and the voices in opposition must be heard. We have an opportunity to cooperate on issues of concern, such as releasing more political prisoners, assisting in post-conflict ethnic regions, improving economic opportunities, creating a greater role for opposition voices in government, and seeking a greater role for women in society.

In this period of transition, I would advise those in this country to look to the United States for support and guidance. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Washington last month, "the United States is committed to supporting this reform. We want to encourage it. We acknowledge it. But more than that, we want to be partners in seeing it continue."

Happy Independence Day everyone.